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Automatic writing by a blind subject.

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AUTOMATIC WRITING BY A BLIND SUBJECT *

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THE charts to be shown with this paper present reproductions of selected specimens from a series of automatic writings done in the summer and autumn of 1920.

The subject, to be known as E—, was a man sixty-five years of age, stone blind from the age of two and one-half years. Professionally, E— was a musician, distinguished in two continents as a concert pianist, composer, and author of works on musical interpretation and criticism. He also held various college positions as teacher of piano and lecturer on aesthetics. He was acquainted with much of the best in literature, as well as in music, and in some of the other arts. The science which had been given him was largely of the popular or *pseudo*-sort.

E— claimed to have no knowledge of the alphabet save only a partial list of the letters which he made by conscious effort (see line one of Plate VIII) in a form very different in most instances from that used in the automatic script. His writings for publication and most of his correspondence had been dictated to an amanuensis. Intimate letters written by his own hand had been in a Braille resembling not at all the forms of script or print.

In 1917, Mrs. E— (or “Nettie”) had passed away. With her going, E— said, the “light” of his personal and professional life went out. He suffered a physical and something of a mental collapse, following that event, but rallied and was able to continue his work, successfully, during the remaining seven years of his life. To aid in his recovery friends had sought—not in vain—for mediumistic messages from “Nettie”. E— was assured that Mrs. E— was often near him and would in time “learn” to manifest herself to him in an “evidential manner”.

Such assurance had come with peculiar impressiveness in early June of 1920, when E—, enroute to his summer home (a home full of memories of “Nettie”) had stopped in Boston and paid a visit to a noted medium there. A little later the summer days were being spent by E— and a group of house guests in strenuous practice for coming concerts. The evenings were occupied in the reading of

* Abstract of a paper read at the Columbus meeting of the American Psychological Association, Dec. 29, 1927.

post-war literature of the Sir-Oliver-Lodge-Sir-Conan-Doyle type. At last E— was given a pencil and paper and asked to assume a passive attitude for the reception of possible “messages”. Almost immediately the pencil began to move, mechanically, across the paper. Evening after evening, from July 13 to about the middle of August, the experiment continued, two sheets of letter paper being covered at a sitting. These papers were numbered, dated, interpreted—even merrily criticized—by E—’s close friend and guest, a Mrs. D., *B.* (Typical selections are shown in Plates I-VII.)

The series was brought to a close when an “unfriendly spirit” * seemed to gain control of the pencil. Thereafter E— claimed to have lost all *rapport* with the “source” of his writings, and to be unable to do more in the automatic line. However, in late September, to oblige the writer of this article, E— made another attempt. (The results are shown in Plate VIII.)

At this last sitting the first request was for a list of such letters of the alphabet as E— thought he knew; for he had said, “I never learned to write, and do not know the form of the written letters, though I do know some of the printed letters made square, as in my signature, for instance.” While complying with the request E— named the letters as he made them, mentioning the following as those of which he had “not the remotest idea”: *G, J, K, Q, X, Z.* The *G* appears frequently in the automatic writings, the *K* at least once. When asked if in ordinary writing he would make *A* as just demonstrated, he said, “Yes; *A* is a square, closed up, with a little something out to the right □.” Asked if as a child he might not have played with blocks having raised letters, he replied, “Very possibly I did.” E—’s method of producing the line of letters shown was by grasping the pencil in the fingers of both hands and measuring his way cautiously across the page. When this was done, and a fresh page provided, he held the pencil lightly in the fingers of his right hand only, relaxed the tension of the preceding effort, and *waited*—for the automatic demonstration. Nothing happened. Then a relative of E—, present at the interview, suggested that another person in the room put the tips of her fingers about the top of E—’s pencil, lightly touching it. This was done. Immediately the pencil wavered; then moved, ouija-like across the page. At the completion of the first few letters the helping fingers were removed, but the pencil continued, forth and back, until the

* This “ghost”, according to E—, had appeared to him many times and menacingly, throughout his life, and especially in his youthful hours of piano practice. Concerning him E— once consulted William James. The ghost was finally “laid”—after the events reported in this paper. But that is “another story”.

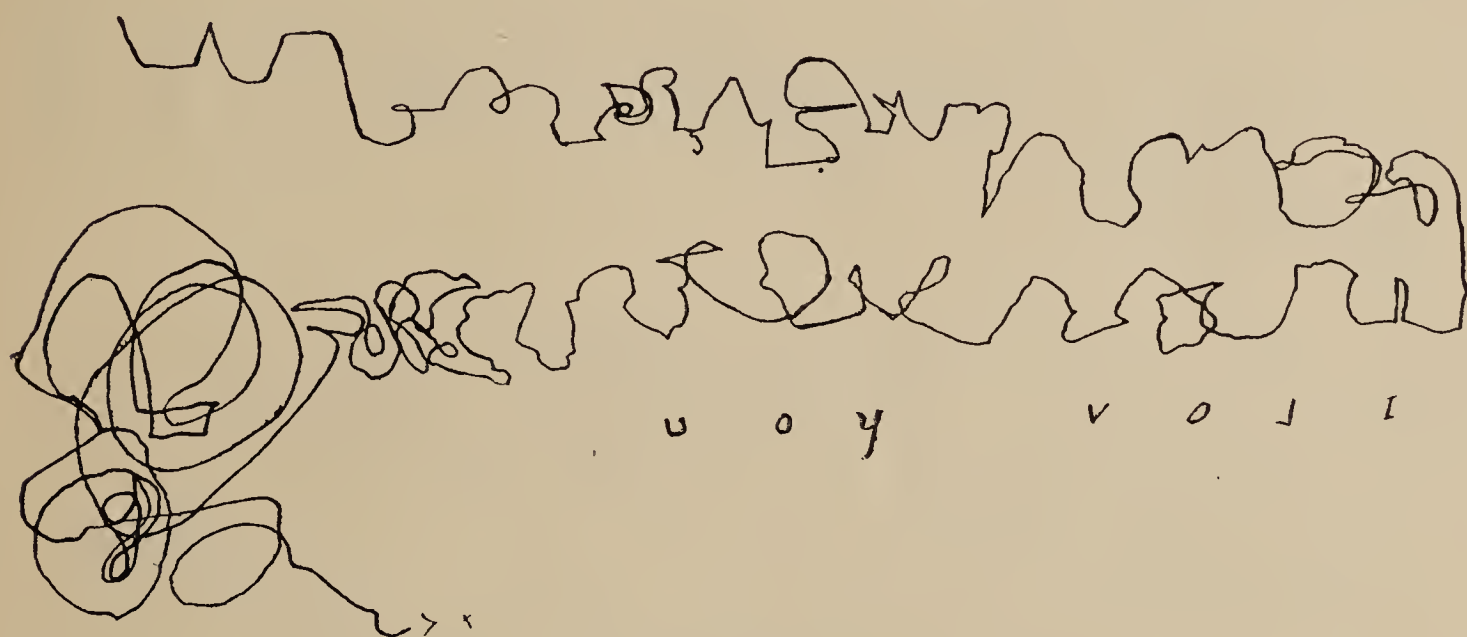
final ending in meaningless curves. At this point, evidencing an awareness of at least a *difference* in the output, E— remarked, as to a person palpably present by his side, “This doesn’t mean anything, dearie.” And the experiment ended.

EXPLANATION OF THE PLATES

With each of the reproduced writings there is appended or interlined a surmised interpretation. The first evening’s work is not shown, as it had resulted in nothing but scrolls and flourishes, interlaced and recrossed in a manner impossible to decipher or to copy.

Plate 1.

July 14, 1920
No. 2, B



"My darling I Love you" ?

* Continued in a dim and hopeless scrawl.

Plate I shows E—’s second performance. Already he had learned to separate his lines, doing very little overlapping except at the end. A few letters also stand out so distinctly that it is possible to guess, in the light of what followed, at the meaning of the whole.

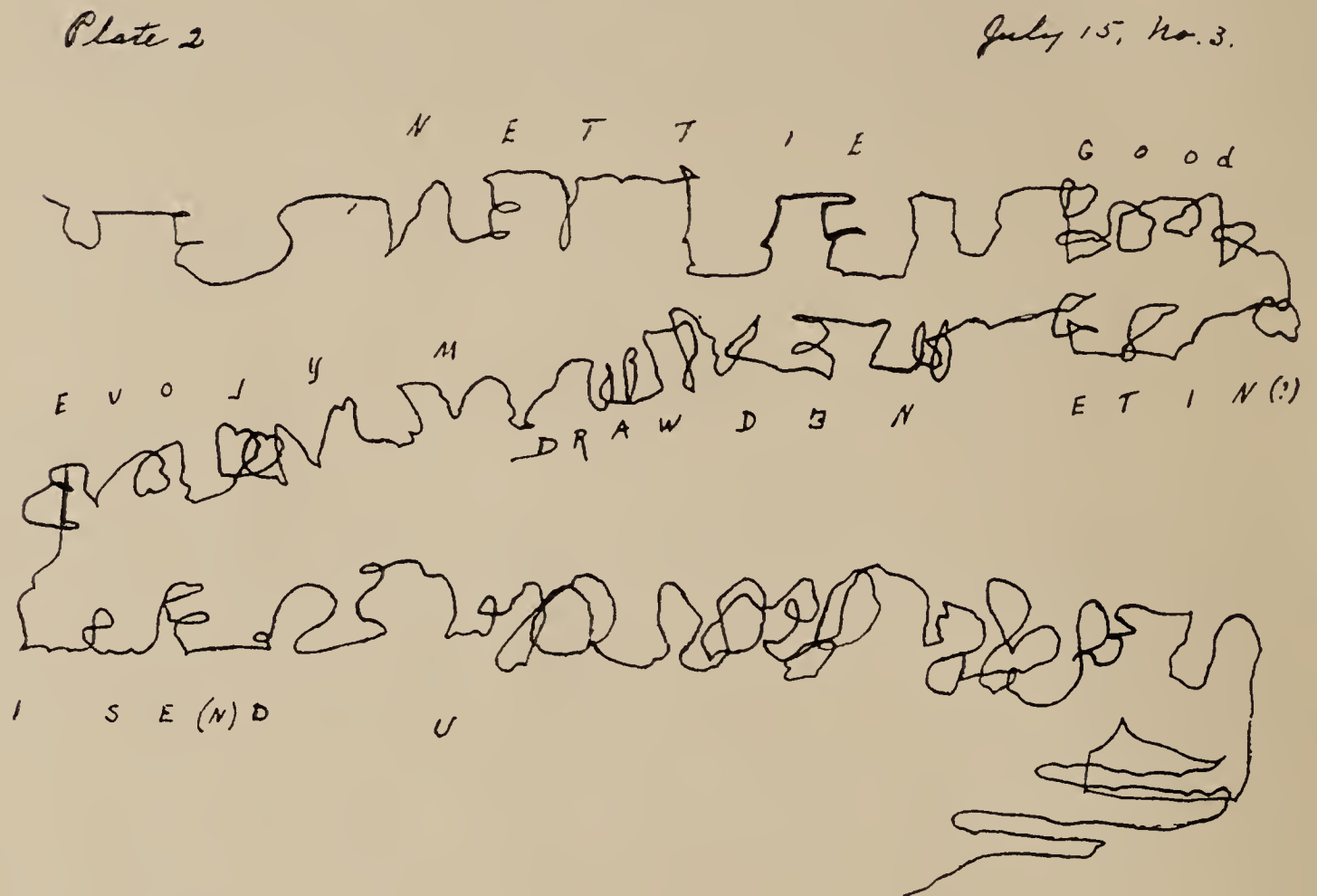
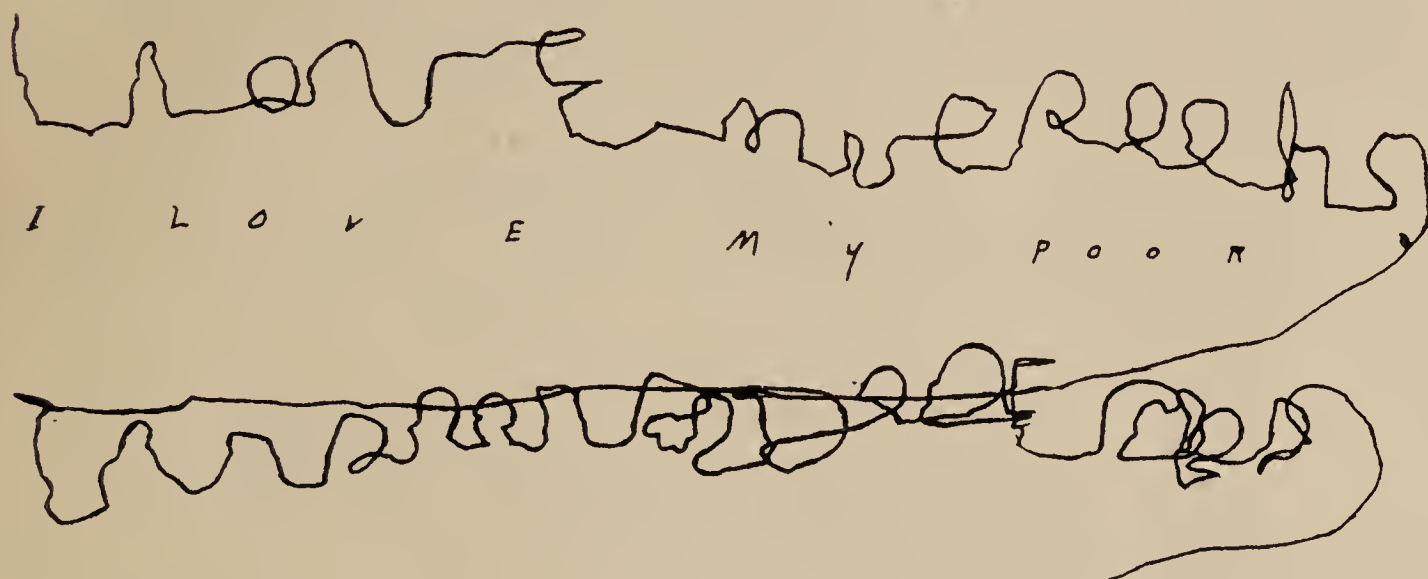


Plate II. On the third evening E— still writes both ways across the paper, and loses himself finally in a scrawl. The word “Nedward” is his own pet name, known to Mrs. E—. The *U*’s, *V*, *Y*, and *A* are much alike.

Plate 3

July 16, No. 4. A.



No. 4. B.

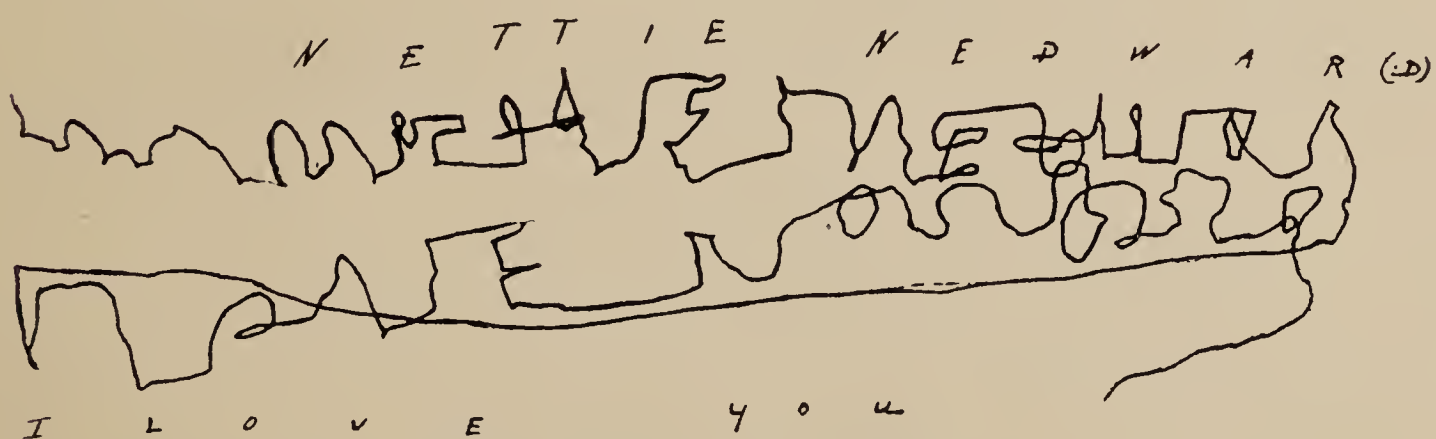
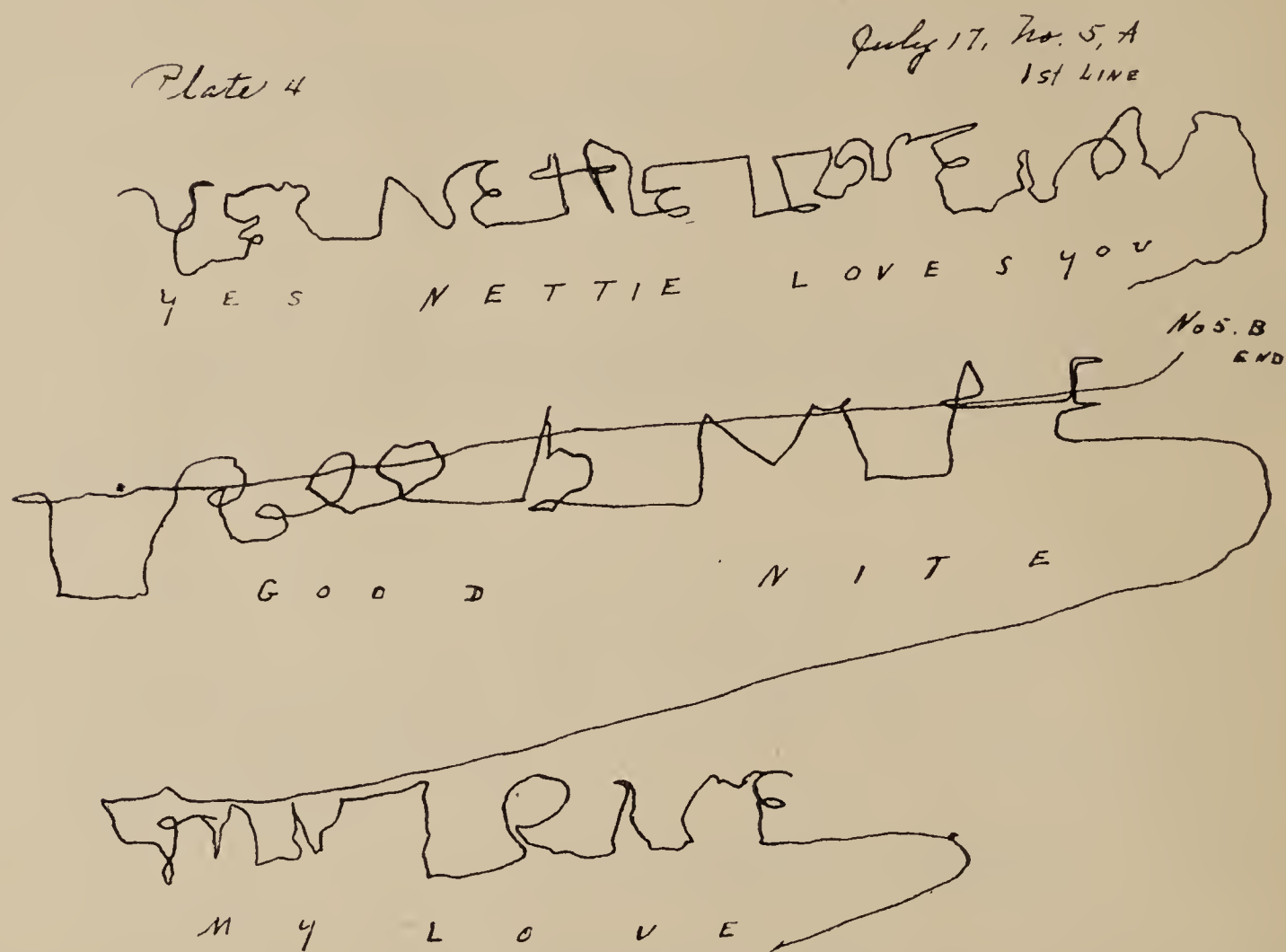


Plate III. At the fourth sitting E— had learned to swing across to the left for the beginning of a new line. The *t*'s are better crossed. The *A* is still inverted, but shows some evidence of a cross.



Another line of faint scrawls.

Plate IV. At the fifth trial there is great gain in legibility.

Plate 5

July 19, No. 6. A

NE TT I . E IS H E R E D A R L I N G L E T

U S W R (I) T E N O W

W H Y D O I L O V E Y O U

Plate 6

July 19, No. 6. B
END

G O O D N I T E B E L (O V) E (D) M I N E

July 20, No. 7
15 LINES

I A M H E R E D A R L I N G C A N
E W R I T E N O W D A R L I N G

Plates V and VI exhibit merely the continuation of the writing, with little progress as to clarity of script or of "message".

Plate 7

July 28, No. 15

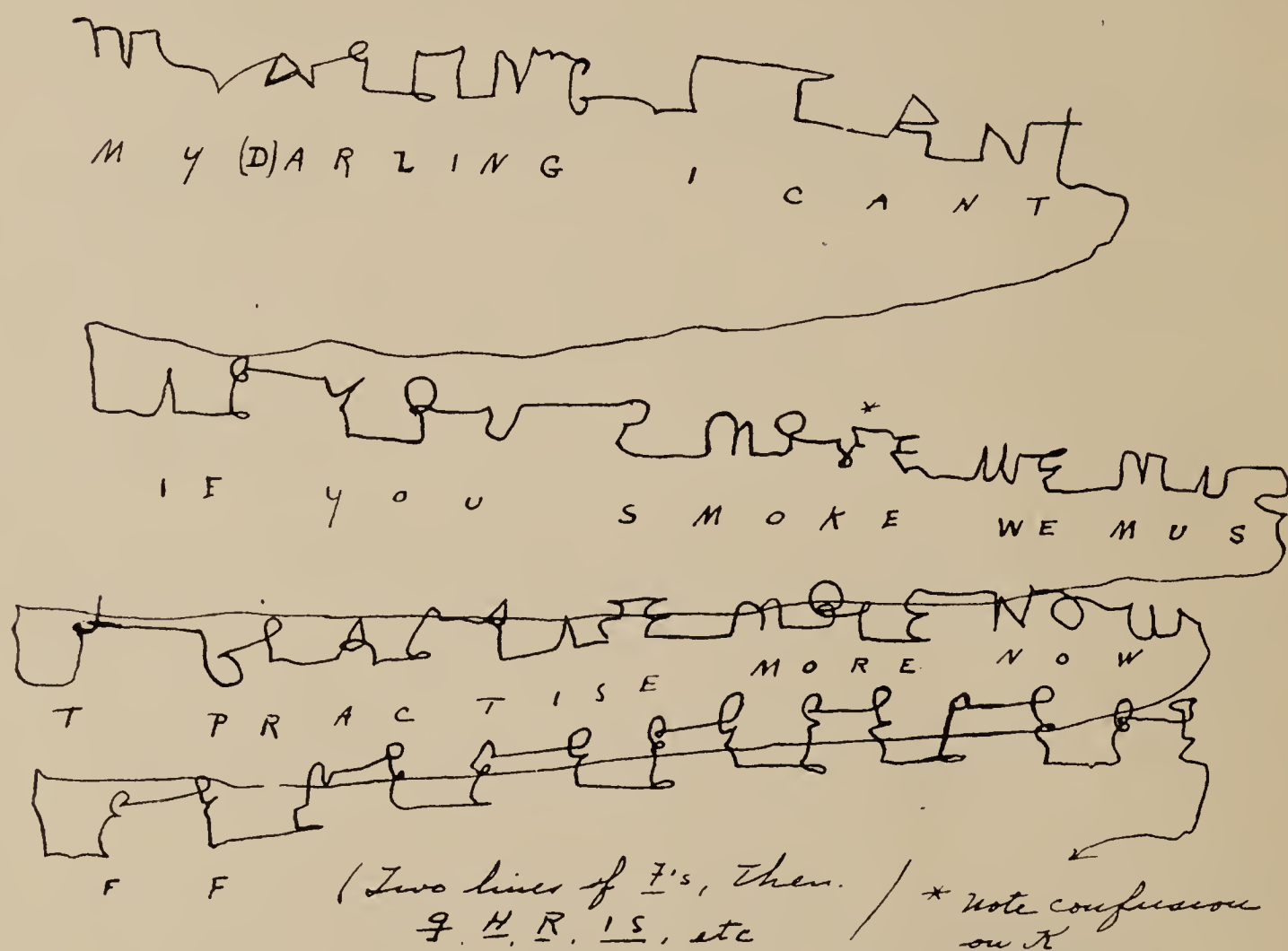


Plate VII. Skipping to the fifteenth sitting, we find the A's right side up, the Y's improved, the K showing confusion but invention as to form. The idea of practice is introduced.

Plate 8.

Sept. 27, 1920

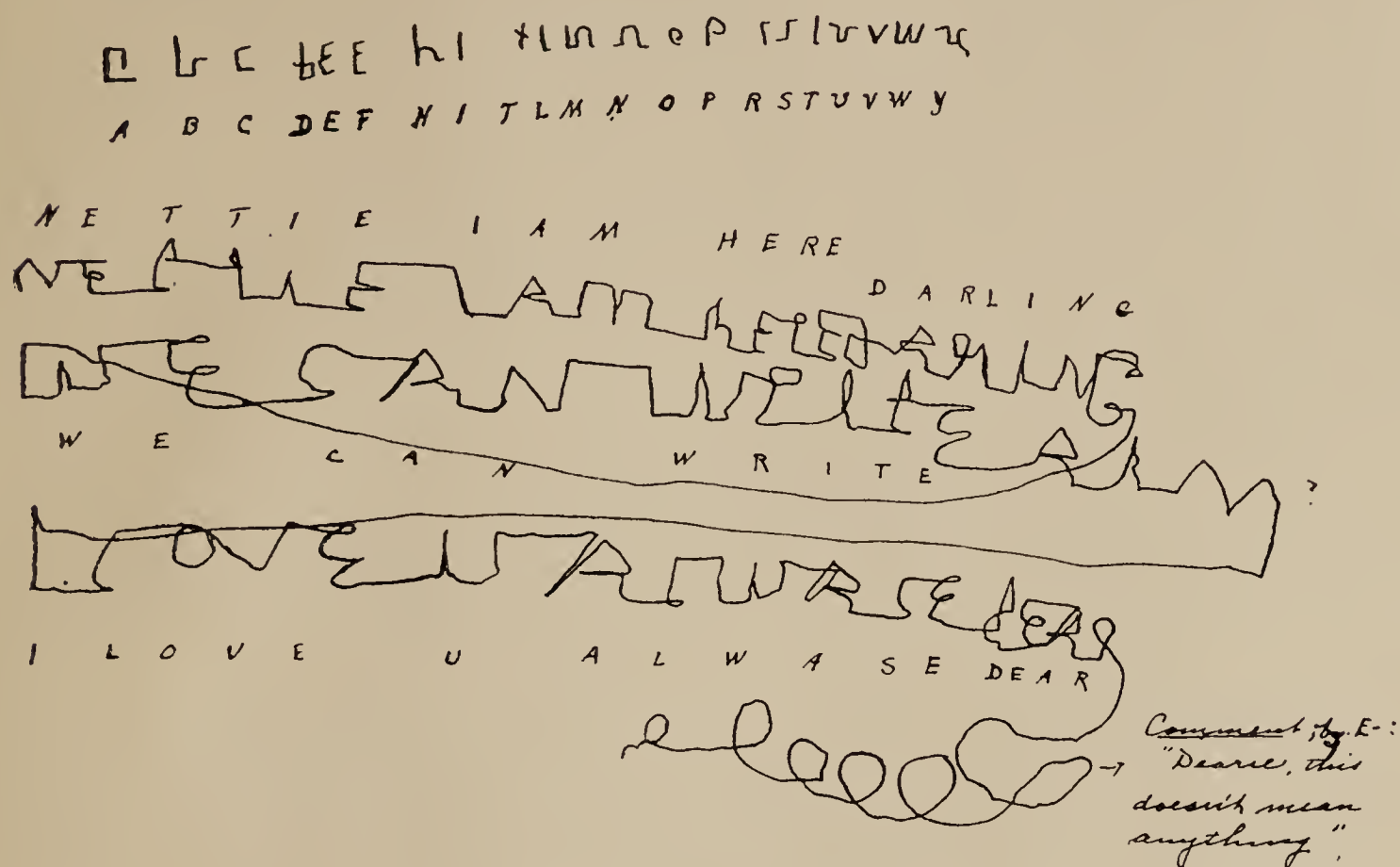


Plate VIII has been discussed. At the top is the alphabet as E— thought he remembered it. Below is the last of his automatic writings. Note the surprising perfection of his *A*'s, and certain other letters; also the quaint spelling of “ALWASE”.

SUBJECTIVE ATTITUDE OF E—

Evidence of some “inner speech”, or awareness of content, was found in the manner of terminating the last paper (Plate VIII). Again, in referring to a sentence in Plate VII, “My darling, I can’t if you smoke.” E— added, naïvely, “And I immediately laid down my cigar.” Another paper, not reproduced here, contained the sentence, “My darling, do not bear so hard on the pencil.” This was followed by several lines of very much lighter strokes. Doubtless in each instance the recognition of the content came with the same type of surprise that has accompanied other well-known cases of automatic and ouija writing—or the *dénouement* of our dreams.

The movement of E—’s hand, in the writing, had the smooth glide of the ouija pointer. It was found, by experiment, that the hand or index finger, not only of E— but of each of several normal but blinded-folded subject, could, when “passively yielded”, be substituted quite effectively for the pointer on the ouija board. The

subjects, of course, wrote (muscle reading fashion) only what was in the "minds" of the guides. Dr. June Downey has shown (see *The Will-Temperament and its Testing*) that a hand so yielded can be induced to write, with a pencil, what is in the mind of the subject. This subject is aware at the moment of what is being written, but is unaware that he is the originator of the movement also. This latter must have been E—'s state when the presumably guiding hand was likewise a "figment of the imagination".

The subjective origin of this work—characters, content, and movement—must have been suspected at last by E himself, else he would not so readily have given up the fascinating pursuit. If further evidence to the point were necessary, it could be added that, so far as "we on this mortal plane" are able to judge, the cultured Mrs. E—, had she been the author, would have chosen, for so willing a hand, a type of script very different and a content of thought more significant.

The suggestibility of E— (for auto- or hetero-impressions) was augmented by the fatigue of the evening hour, a tendency to depression, the concentration of attention within narrow lines, and the "nearness" of the paraconsciousness with its pressing demands. The "messages", apparently, are of a wish-fulfilling character. They "are such stuff as dreams are made on."

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